

Shen school board hears from taxpayers on land sale

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Clifton Park>>A group of concerned residents of the Shenendehowa Central School District Tuesday implored the board of education to find a way to keep a 34-acre parcel of district-owned land in the public domain.

The agenda for the Oct. 11 board of education meeting had been advertised as a mix of district policy reviews, audit reports and tenure and staffing recommendations. A meeting like that usually draws three or four people.

But the appearance of 40 community minded activists in the audience made the meeting unusual. The residents came to make a unified case on the proposed land sale. Ten residents took the opportunity to speak to the board and all ten gave reasons why the land should remain in public hands.

In August the district put out a second Request For Proposals (RFP) seeking bids for a large, vacant, forested, piece of land that is part of Shatekon Elementary School. The parcel is north of school, south of Route 146, west of Maxwell Drive Extension and east of Moe Road.

Last year's RFP drew a single bid of \$1.7 million from Clifton Park-based DCG Development. The company withdrew the bid a few days before it was to be opened.

The new RFP has drawn the interest of the Town of Clifton Park which has had discussions with the board and made an informal written offer. The town has yet to file an official bid through the RFP process. When it announced the second RFP, the board said it was not required to take the highest monetary offer. Bids on the land will be accepted until Oct. 31.

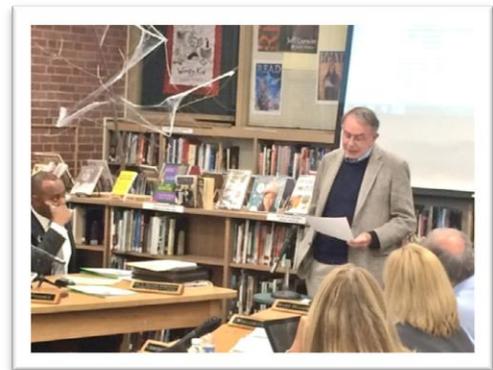
A growing number of residents working together individually or through groups like the Friends of Clifton Park Open Space or have urged the board of education in recent weeks to find a way to keep the land in public hands. They have written letters to local newspapers, gathered petitions, and even done radio interviews.

In speaking to board members directly at the Oct. 11 meeting they presented the petitions containing more than 800 names, quoted the petition signers' comments, used eloquent reasoning, presented case law, quoted the district's mission statement, and asked for common sense reasoning.

Speaking for the Friends of Clifton Park Open Space, a group that has a history going back nearly 25 years, Susan Burton said the group would like the district to work with the Town of Clifton Park on finding a way to keep the parcel in public hands.

"We know it takes two to make this happen," she said. "We strongly believe there is great value to the community, the school and its students for keeping the parcel for public use. Our goal is to keep this parcel in the public domain now before it's too late."

She asked board members if they wanted to have their public service remembered for leaving a legacy behind or for losing the chance to set the town apart for decades to come.



Retired English teacher Joseph Nial tells the Shen Board of Education of the benefits a centrally located park brings to a community

Clifton Park resident Dan Mathias quoted state education law and case law as he made his point that the board must review all responses to the RFP in terms of overall value to the community.

“A commercial bidder will almost always trump a public bidder on price if that is the primary bid objective,” he said. “Hence, the critical issue for this transaction is how will the school district evaluate the value of the commercial bids versus the value that a park would provide to the community? I would ask that the board consider the value of a public park to this community.”

Jim Ruhl, another member of the Shen community, remarked that he had never voted against a school budget and planned to continue that pattern of loyalty but expected some reciprocity in return.

“The mission statement so poignantly expressed on the district’s website must be honored,” he said. “In part it states, to work continuously with the community.”

Retired English teacher Joseph Nial, another member of FOCPOS, used his years of working with words to make an eloquent plea to the school board.

“As an elected board, show that you too can have a vision of what is best for the future of our children and the community,” he said. “Assert forcefully that you are a concerned and beneficent member of our Clifton Park community - that education extends beyond school walls and includes values such as community welfare.”

Longtime FOCPOS member Frank Berlin spoke for many taxpayers who want the land to stay in public hands when he noted that if the district was to sell it to the Town of Clifton Park, the residents would be buying their land with their own money.

“I feel funny even talking about this. It’s a no brainer,” he said. “Public value trumps private value.”

After the meeting school board president Robert Pressly said he found the speakers excellent at making their points.

“It’s one of the best presentations I’ve ever seen,” he said. “We got excellent content from the community and we will review it all. We owe it to them.”

Shen Superintendent L. Oliver Robinson noted that the district’s attorney was in the room for the residents’ presentations. Robinson said the board will be engaged in an evaluation team and will review all options offered by bids received from the RFP.

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